

## Rumors Of and About God

Peace, love, joy - and patience.

The goal of all of my teaching is to contribute to the growth of these things in you and me, in us; to help keep us mindful of the life- and cultural-changing power of peace, love and joy. To call us back to these things if we have strayed from our commitment to experience and express them. To offer information, knowledge, skill and practices that we can use to help these life-enhancing skills to grow in us.

Peace, love, joy and patience.

We start today with joy, pure joy. Quiet your minds, open your hearts and listen.

In Sunday school, I learned to think of God as a very old white-bearded man on a throne, who stood above creation and occasionally stirred it with a stick. When I am dreaming quantum dreams, what I see is an infinite web of relationship, flung across the vastness of space like a luminous net. It is made of energy, not thread. As I look, I can see light moving through it as a pulse moves through veins. What I see “out there” is no different from what I feel inside. There is a living hum that might be coming from my neurons but might just as well be coming from the furnace of the stars. When I look up at them there is a small commotion in my bones, as the ashes of dead stars that house my marrow rise up like metal filings toward the magnet of their living kin.

I want us to spend some time together talking about God. Not that such an understanding is actually possible. Our minds cannot comprehend God.

There is a story I heard when I was in seminary about a king who once called his wise men together and said to them, “I want you to out into the kingdom and search high and low and find out for me if there are angels. Are angels real? I have heard of visitors from the heavenly realm called angels but I have never seen one. Go find out if angels are real.”

So the wise men went out into the four directions of the kingdom looking in all of the libraries, searching all the wisdom literature, talking to both sages and common people with the question, “Are angels real?” After a year or so of this intensive investigation, they returned to their king with the results of their findings. They have summarized what they had discovered and one of their number was designated to be the spokesman.

“Well,” demanded the king, “did you find if angels are real? Did you see any angels?”

The spokesman said, “No we did not. But, we heard plenty of rumors.”

So we shall begin to talk about rumors of and about God. I’m doing this to help in clarifying our thinking about God. I’ve said that one of the most life-transforming and world-transforming things that we can get right is that of personal identity. We are who we are in God. No more. No less. If this is so, who is this God of whom we speak? Or what? Does everyone have the same identity? What we believe about that will affect our social and justice systems. And, it will affect how we treat the planet. The matter of God is massively important.

The quote I read to you is from the writings Barbara Brown Taylor and it gives us a good start and illustrates the humongous shift in which we live where one order has clearly, at least for most people, passed away and another is not yet in place.

By the way, just this week someone handed me a flyer for a workshop occurring this Summer in New York sponsored by the New York Center for Jungian Studies. They are having Dr. James Hollis speak and the theme for the conference is: In-Between Times: Something Gone, Something Not Yet.” (Great minds think alike! :)

I want you to hear Barbara Brown Taylor’s words again. They are pure joy. And, they reflect the shift we are in the midst of.

By the way, if you don’t know who Barbara Brown Taylor is, she is an amazing speaker and writer in the religious and spiritual arena. Three years ago Time Magazine listed her among the 100 most influential people in the world. She is a

former Episcopal Priest and now an “at-large” spiritual teacher, my term for her. (Here is a link to learn more if you are interested - ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara\\_Brown\\_Taylor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbara_Brown_Taylor) )

If you do a Google search, you’ll find lots of information about her and pages of quotes by her. Two of which are very relevant for today’s talk. She says in one, “To get God on your side is a great way to feel powerful.” And another: “I can’t help but note that God is being useful to a lot of people trying to harm one another.” So true.

What I like about this passage is that not only does it fit the current theme but also it is so full of joy. Listen:

In Sunday school, I learned to think of God as a very old white-bearded man on a throne, who stood above creation and occasionally stirred it with a stick. When I am dreaming quantum dreams, what I see is an infinite web of relationship, flung across the vastness of space like a luminous net. It is made of energy, not thread. As I look, I can see light moving through it as a pulse moves through veins. What I see “out there” is no different from what I feel inside. There is a living hum that might be coming from my neurons but might just as well be coming from the furnace of the stars. When I look up at them there is a small commotion in my bones, as the ashes of dead stars that house my marrow rise up like metal filings toward the magnet of their living kin.

This not only joyful writing but also it reflect the transition from a naive world-view to one that fully embraces the information of current science that is full of joy and expansiveness.

My hunch is that every person in this room grew up being taught, either explicitly or by osmosis, that God was a larger than life human-like person who lived up in the sky. We may not have had Barbara Brown Taylor’s vision of God taking a stick and stirring things on earth but likely we had some such notion of God. For many of us, God was like the religious version of Santa Claus. He, always this imagining of God is male, had a list and was checkin’ it twice, he’s gonna find out whose naughty or nice, so watch out, God’s gonna get you.

I remember as a child watching my brother begin his “crisis of faith,” for want of a better term, by asking questions like this: “If God is all-powerful, could he create an object that could not be moved? And, then could he create an unstoppable object? And, then, could he get them together?” I know, silly. But, children think in such ways - pre-critical, naive. Some folks don’t ever grow out of that way of thinking when it comes to their religious beliefs.

I am going to share with you today some of my own evolving understanding of God. This is my personal “God journey,” if you will. It is like sharing pictures from the photo album of my religious and spiritual journey. It may remind you of some places you have been or places you would like to go.

Long before I ever heard of people like Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Ilija Delio, Thomas Berry, Richard Rohr, Michael Dowd or Diarmuid O’Murchu, I had begun my own evolving understanding of God.

Early in my studies I was far more focused on psychology than religion or theology. I did know about some stirrings that were taking place in the arena of theology. The word “theology” means “the study of God.” The word is made up of “theos” - God - and “logos” - means logic, reasoning, understanding. Theology, then, is understandings about God.

The first memory of a shift I had in my own understanding came when I had just begun my religious studies and heard about a little book by J.B. Phillips. Phillips was a bible scholar from England. He had come out with a translation of the New Testament that was extremely popular because of its freshness and readability when I first started my studies. He wrote a book called “Your God is Too Small: A Guide for Believers and Skeptics Alike.”

His claim in this book, published in the 1950’s was that we had not found a God big enough for our modern needs and, thus, suffered from a limited idea of God. It has been over fifty years since I first read the book but it still speaks to me in that Phillips exposed some of the very limited and useless, if not damaging, ideas people had about God - and still do. He referred to some of this by giving God titles like “Resident policeman,” “Grand Old Man,” “Meek and Mind,” and

“Managing Director.” I think his book started significant conversations for people that helped them find more meaningful ways of thinking about God.

I had also read around that time Paul Tillich’s two collections of sermons. The first book I read was “The Courage To Be.” This book has one of the most powerful passages on acceptance, self-acceptance, that I have ever encountered. In case you don’t know it, I want to read it to you:

You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted! If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but acceptance.

It is true. Courage is needed for this acceptance. For there is nothing in our culture that encourages this kind of radical spiritual stance.

This was profoundly helpful and hopeful to me in the arena of psychology.

The other book of his that affected my God understanding was a book of sermons called “The Shaking of the Foundations.” Here I began to understand that for Tillich God was best described as “The Ground of Being.” This massive thinker said that God was not a being. God was being itself.

Let the implication of this sink in for a minute or two. Tillich was saying that God is not a noun. God is a verb.

Tillich was just the tip-of-the-iceberg when it came to what was going on in the academic world, in the fields of philosophy and theology, about thinking about God.

Although the phrase “God is dead” can be found in the writings of Nietzsche, and others, dating back to 1882, I would say that the influence of people like Paul Tillich and others didn’t go very far from academic circles.

There is a curious circle of influence on what determines how we think about reality. Our culture determines largely what we think is real. Until there is a shift in science that finally breaks through. Culture overrides science until there is a crisis or momentum in science and the “facts of the matter” can no longer be ignored. Then there is a shift in how reality is perceived. Or, in what is called reality.

I could give you many examples of this but the one we have talked about a lot in here is that of the Copernicus and Galileo revolution. Their insights were not at first embraced because to do so would be too upsetting of the culture and for the church. Key doctrines and teachings of the church would have to be changed if they were right. Culture overrides science until it can do so no longer. This happened in the case of the Copernican revolution and that created the rift between science and religion.

Another place to see this culture-science-reality circle dance played out is in the area of medicine. There was a time where the culture of medicine taught that a good doctor was a dirty doctor. That is to say, a doctor with a smock that showed he didn’t mind getting bloody doing his work of surgery. This was also a time when a high percentage of surgery patients, especially women who had just given medically assisted birth, died under medical care. Then it was discovered that there were things called nasty bacteria that caused the deaths and cleaning up would lower the death rate. The culture of medicine resisted this change until there was a crisis caused by undeniable evidence and then the reality was changed. At least, the understanding of what was real. This is also an important point to grasp. Reality doesn’t change. Our understanding of reality changes.

The culture in which theology or religious thinking was done was one shaped less by Paul Tillich and more by the Pledge of Allegiance of the Flag which was changed in the 1950s to say that we were “one nation, under God.” This change was made to differentiate the United States from the “godless communism” of the Soviet Union at the time. The reality also then was that children at school would be safe if they got under their desks in case of a nuclear attack.

I came to Houston in 1966 to begin my work and training here. I hadn't been here but a few months when Time Magazine had on its cover what has remained its most renowned cover in the entire history of the magazine. It boldly asked the question, "Is God dead?"

I spent hours trying to find the very humorous "Obituary of God" that was published in some magazine at the time this came out. I was unable to find it. If any of you are able to do so, I'll read it to you. It reads like a regular obituary with various "friends" of God paying tribute to "him." The Pope's words are especially moving.

The 60's were daring times in lots of ways. Characterized as an era of long-hairs and hippies pitted against "hard-hats," it was a time when all sorts of things were called into question. I personally got introduced to Harvey Cox whose book "The Secular City" was all the rage at the time. There were other books that were hot items. One was called "The Comfortable Pew," critical of the church. And, there was John Robinson's blockbuster of a book, "Honest to God." I read them all and once preached a sermon titled, "Going From The Comfortable Pew To The Secular City Being Honest To God."

Harvey Cox took a liking to me and got me a scholarship to attend Harvard to do post-doctoral work in psychology and religion. There I sat in on James Fowler's research group that eventually produced the book on "Stages of Faith." I think it was there, in 1972, that I formulated for myself, and you'll have to make your own decision about this, that the primary purpose of human life - after we have met the survival and security needs, is spiritual and psychological growth.

During this time I got to meet and converse with Robert Bellah whose work on Civil Religion also called our understanding of God into question. To over-simplify the matter, what God is it who is referred to when Presidents and politicians end their speeches with the phrase, "And, God bless America"? Or, what God is it who is prayed to before football games under Friday Night Lights?

Another one of the major shifts in my own thinking that occurred during this time had to do with reading the works of Peter Berger and others on what is known as

“the social construction of reality.” I began to see that reality is a consensual agreement about what is true, about what is real. This is important to acknowledge when we are seeking to experience and express what I referred to last week as an “evidential and evolutionary spirituality.”

During this time I also got to meet and hear lecture John Cobb, the philosopher and theologian who is most associated with a school of thought called “process philosophy” which holds it that not only is everything in process but the very act of engaging a matter in observation changes both parties and this, he held, also applied to God. If God is that in which we live and move and have our being and if we, like all of creation are evolving, then so is God. Quantum physics would later confirm that the observer changes the observed. I hope to begin to talk about “quantum theology” next week.

I remember the first time I referred to God as “she” in a sermon. You could hear the collective gasp distinctly. In 2008 when William Young gave us the novel, “The Shack,” where God is portrayed as an ample, motherly black woman many people were still uncomfortable with that.

The church by and large has been either unaware of or resistant to all of this. There is a great deal of exciting change going on in the academic world under the umbrella of theology. I’d say most churches have been protected from this. The Jesus Seminar attempted to make a big change in this by doing its work outside the circle of “church approved” academic institutions. Perhaps because the church sees its main job to conserve and transmit a two-thousand year old tradition, it has been more interested in protecting truth than in discovering it. As a result, with a few exceptions, the Christian church in America is dying. Both Richard Rohr and Jim Wallace, two quite committed Christians, are prophesying that the current wedding between evangelical Christianity and the political right will cost the church in general its credibility for years to come.

Long before I heard of and got involved with the Jesus Seminar I had read, and recommended in here when I did, works by Karen Armstrong - “A History of God” and “The Battle for God.” The understanding of God in these works is the Jewish, Muslim, Christian “monotheistic sky-god.” Indeed, this is the God of Christian fundamentalism. Just last week in the Houston Chronicle there was a full page



cover story about “belief in God.” This is the God, the “sky God,” that is written about.

It comes as a shock to many people to hear that this understanding of God, that God is a being, a male figure, who lives high above the earth in a heavenly realm, did not exist prior to around 10,000 B.C. This is the date of the Agricultural Revolution when the human animal went from a “hunter-gatherer” way of life to settled agricultural communities. We will come back to talk about this history later.

Today I am sharing with you pictures of my “God journey.” As I said, perhaps it will remind you of some of your own spiritual journey or will offer suggestions of places to visit.

Why is this important? Of what relevance is it to us? Or should it be?

There are many answers to these questions. They will make up the content of our talks for the coming weeks.

We live in an exciting time, don’t we? It is a time that is a combination of a mystery thriller, a Russian spy novel, a political “Fifty Shades of Grey,” “The Matrix,” a television game show where we have to guess if doom and gloom or hope hide behind Door Number 3, “To Tell The Truth,” and more all combined. Like in the Wizard of Oz I keep thinking that any minute someone will pull the curtain back to let us know what is really going on. I hope I live to see the end credits. Maybe go for a drink and talk about it afterward. I do confess that I’m concerned about the future for my grandchildren if we as a culture keep doing what we are doing.

Clearly, whether you are to the political right or left, it’s a new ball game and most of us are not quite sure what the rules of this new game are.

Last week I shared with you my current understanding of what it means to be Christian. My current understanding of what it means to be a Christian is to enthusiastically embrace the goal of living a life that reflects the values that grow from a knowledge of and a trust in the God of Jesus. Jesus leads us into a life that crosses all sorts of boundaries. We live in a culture that is about drawing lines and

creating barriers. The life of Jesus-following is a life that faces forward, not back. We are not going back. That's entropy. There may be a desire to go back to what we imagine is a grander time ecclesiastically or politically. It won't happen. Evolution is pulling us forward. We must have faith in the God who is calling us forward. You can see this call lived out in the life of Jesus.

What is this faith?

Faith for me is a radical openness to the truth, wherever it may come from, whatever it might turn out to be.

A friend of mine, who was Jewish and who died just this last year, gave me a book by the great Jewish scholar, thinker, rabbi Abraham Heschel. The book has a great title: "God's Search for Man." In it he writes:

Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion, its message become meaningless.

Here it is again: Faith is a radical openness to the truth, wherever it may come from, whatever it might turn out to be.

There is a word that has started popping up in the newspapers and in the various other media lately. The word is the one used to tell us that we can't always believe what we see or thought was true because we live in a "post-truth" world. So we are greeted with things like "alternative facts" and "fake news" alerts. Post-truth is the truth that is based on emotion, preference, allegiance, tribe and grievance. It is not based on "facts" or "evidence." What we are moving into is not just a new set of facts but a new way of thinking. We live in a time when we do not simply have more tools in our toolbox, we have a chance to see "reality" differently.

Much of what is destroying this planet and those of us who live upon it is the result of a lack of education. This leads to something people think is true but which is not

based on evidence. The massive ignorance that leads people and nations to think that the best solution to the problems we have is a bigger military is the result of incorrect knowledge. If we could teach that each and every person is of the same essence, perhaps we would stop the killing and the hatred that are so fear based.

Having said that, however, as much as we need rational thinking to dominate the conversations that would benefit us, rational thinking is not the only or even best way of knowing! While it's certainly helpful, even essential, the critical mind can't fully comprehend the most meaningful issues in life like God, love, sexuality, grace, suffering, and death. For that we need contemplative, non-dual consciousness, which is much more like intuitive knowing.

So we will continue to talk about rational matters. How we understand the sea of energy in which we live determines everything about us - whether we are aware of it or not. Our understanding of God shapes our spiritual life. Clear?

Even though we may be driven to speak, what we say - at least what I'm attempting to share - is really about the unspeakable. It is about something that in the end we cannot understand in any rational way but if we don't make the effort to understand, we will likely never end up in a stance of transforming awe. Understand?

Niels Bohr, the physicist whose work is changing how we think of the cosmos, told the story about a young rabbinical student who went to hear three lectures by a very famous and learned rabbi. Later when his friends asked him what he had learned he said, "His first lecture was brilliant, clear and simple. I understood every word. The second lecture was even better, deep and subtle. I didn't understand much but it was clear that the rabbi understood all of it. The third lecture was by far the best. It was a great and unforgettable experience. I understood nothing and the rabbi didn't understand much either."

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this: you carry precious cargo. So, watch your step.